Roman Catholicism and Democracy: The Postconciliar Era

J. Bryan Hehir

The goal of this essay is to provide a synthetic statement of the understanding of democracy in the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II. This will be achieved in two stages: first, some background information to elucidate the state of the question before the Council; second, an examination of (1) the Conciliar era, (2) the pontificate of John Paul II (1978–2005), and (3) the pontificate of Benedict XVI (2005–13).

A Clash of Cultures: Catholicism and Democracy

If one takes the quite different examples of the American and French Revolutions as a baseline for the establishment of modern democracy, then the relevant religious background for this essay stretches from the responses of Pope Gregory XVI (1831–46) and Pius IX (1846–78) to that of Pius XII (1939–58). The story has been told often, well, and in great detail by historians and theologians. The purpose here is simply to harvest from their work, and sketch a complex narrative.

The journey from Gregory XVI’s description of the modern liberties, upon which democracy is based, as “utter madness,” to Pius XII’s careful but clear endorsement of democracy in 1944 is not easily summarized. One persuasive account by Paolo G. Carozza and Daniel Philpott argues for a long, slow process of convergence, which always (even today) produces substantial, but limited, agreement about the political order. A second account, which has achieved among scholars the status of a classic, is the more detailed analysis of John Courtney Murray, SJ, who provides a lucid sense
of how conflicted the process of convergence was within the Church and in the political world. The two accounts need not be counterpointed; the first is a broad-brush, but careful narrative; the second, a close reading of texts reaching until the decisive moment of Vatican II. Murray’s interpretive essays used a multidimensional analysis of Church teaching to explain that what Gregory XVI condemned is not what Vatican II endorsed even though both were addressing what they understood democratic freedoms to mean.

In the nineteenth century, the papacy encountered a two-dimensional threat. First, a philosophical position (Liberalism in its European model) and second, a political movement designed to force the Catholic Church (along with the Ancien Régime) out of the political process. Neither Gregory XVI nor Pius IX saw any room for convergence or compromise with either of these threats, and they reacted by launching a frontal assault on both, and then withdrawing the Church behind the fortress of the Vatican.

The last pope of the nineteenth century, Leo XIII (1878–1903), shared some of the premises of his predecessors, but he did not push them to the same conclusions. In Murray’s account Leo is the transitional figure in the narrative; he did not achieve convergence, but he did open the door to developments that he neither imagined nor achieved. Indeed, it is arguable that Murray saw openings in Leo’s extensive corpus of political writings that Leo himself did not see. Leo XIII recognized that, by the late nineteenth century, the Church had been backed into a corner with no exit and rapidly declining influence in its primary area of concern—the European state system. The imprisonment was partially coerced and partially chosen. Leo had more confidence in the intellectual resources of Catholicism than his immediate predecessors; he was committed also to playing a vigorous diplomatic role, even with limited possibilities of success. Murray depicts Leo as engaging his surroundings at the philosophical level and the political level simultaneously. Leo XIII died after a long pontificate, but with a very unfinished agenda. He created space for the Church to assert itself in a changing political context, but his successors were not prepared to carry the process of development forward. The term of the process Leo began arrived only with the pontificate of Pius XII.

Like Leo XIII, Pius XII was a conservative intellectual diplomat, determined to provide the Church with a voice and status in the world of states. For both of them, it is necessary to distinguish their view of Liberalism as a philosophical position and democracy as a political regime. Convergence
with Liberalism has always been a limited enterprise for Catholicism; convergence with democracy, at least the Anglo-American version of it, was simpler and more promising. The disagreements with Liberalism—even recognizing that this philosophy has a pluralism of expressions—have been deep and substantial. They include a conception of the human person (less autonomous and more social in the Catholic view) in the understanding of society (less contractual, more organic), in jurisprudence (rooted in Natural Law), and in a more expansive, normative role for the state and civil law.⁷

In spite of continuing tension with advocates of Liberalism during the pontificate of Pius XII and his successors, Catholic teaching on democracy, after World War II, exhibited a search for common ground and expressions of moral support. This shift from the nineteenth century was the result not only of changing ideas, but also current events. A Church that had often been not uncomfortable with authoritarian regimes found itself faced, in the 1930s, with totalitarian regimes, in whose view the Church was as much an adversary as the Liberals. This experience was a principal element in determining the Church’s postwar diplomatic position and eventually its reexamination of democracy. Pius XII, whose entire priesthood was spent in the Vatican diplomatic service, and whose teaching built upon Leo XIII’s opening and went beyond it, is a unique case study in the evolution of the Holy See’s theology and diplomacy. In his diplomatic service as nuncio to Germany and then secretary of state for Pope Pius XI, then-Cardinal Pacelli was a brilliant, but not innovative, representative of Vatican diplomacy.⁸ Neither Liberalism nor democracy were aspects of his statecraft. Elected to the papacy on the threshold of World War II, Pacelli—now Pope Pius XII—moved Catholic social teaching, during the war and during the Cold War, decisively in the direction of support for human rights and recognition of the merits of democracy and the rule of law. The clearest example of the changing dynamic in Catholic social teaching was his 1944 Christmas Address. During the period from 1939–45, the pope used his traditional Christmas Address—a teaching document, not a liturgical homily—to outline the Holy See’s position on the postwar international order. After a century of the Church treating democracy as at least suspect, Pius XII dedicated this address to an examination of the requirements of democratic governance and an affirmation of its value. The address focused primarily on the role citizens should play in influencing the shape of civil society. It also acknowledged the Church’s standard position
that multiple forms of government can exist. But then he turned the address from the citizenry to the structure of the state:

If then, we consider the extent and nature of the sacrifices demanded of all citizens especially in our day when the activity of the state is so vast and decisive, the democratic form of government appears to many as a postulate of nature imposed by reason itself.\(^9\)

The final phrase is the decisive statement in the address: “A postulate of nature imposed by reason” is the archaic, but recognizable language of Natural Law, the Holy See’s substantive discourse in its century-long debate with Liberalism, the “modern liberties,” and, to some degree, forms of democracy. Natural Law discourse used rational reflection on human nature and human experience to derive moral norms for human behavior and human institutions like the state, society, and the economy. As is its typical style, when the Holy See is about to alter its public stance on a topic, the appeal here is to say that democracy “appears to many” as a demand of reason. This is beyond Leo XIII’s teaching, but a less forceful endorsement than we will find in John XXIII, Vatican II, and the postconciliar teaching of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but it is the basic turning point for Catholicism and democracy.

The Conciliar Era

The Second Vatican Council ran from October 1962 to December 1965. In this section, while focusing on two documents of the council, *Dignitatis Humanae* (The Declaration on Religious Freedom) of 1965 and *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) of 1965, I also include the 1963 papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. Collectively, these documents provide an understanding of the relationship of Catholicism to the idea and institutions of democracy in the 1960s and 1970s.

John XXIII convoked Vatican II and promulgated *Pacem in Terris*. While he did not live to see the two major documents of the council about the Church’s public role, his encyclical and his basic posture of promoting a dialogue with the modern world were foundational for the council’s work. The encyclical *Pacem in Terris* was a deeply personal initiative of John XXIII in the last months of his life. Working with his close collaborator, Msgr. Pietro Pavan of the Lateran University, the pope wrote this text about peace in the nuclear age as a response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which had
occurred just as Vatican II opened in Rome. While the encyclical was a clarion call for diplomacy rather than war, the pope’s basic theme was that peace could be achieved and guaranteed only if the rights and duties of persons and states were respected and promoted. His opening sentence set the theme for the encyclical: “Peace on earth, which all men of every era have most eagerly yearned for, can be firmly established only if the order laid down by God be dutifully observed.”10 That order, the letter asserted, can be understood principally in terms of a fabric of rights and duties that structure and shape the national and international common good.

Pacem in Terris was both thoroughly traditional in substance and fully contemporary in tone. The language of the letter was drawn directly from the Natural Law tradition. The theme of order, however, allowed the classical ideas to be understood in a relational, personalistic, and historically contemporary fashion. Without ever articulating this goal explicitly, John XXIII’s interpretation of Natural Law was designed in part to narrow the gap between the centuries-old argument of Natural Law and Natural Rights philosophers. Rather than rehearse that real and significant divide, the encyclical focused on analyzing a modern conception of human rights that owed its heritage to both traditions of discourse. The papal letter endorsed the spectrum of rights found in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and the subsequent implementing documents. The entire tone of the letter sought to build bridges (between the Church and the world, and between East and West) rather than walls, in the context of the still-tense and dangerous atmosphere of the Cold War.

A bridge of some intellectual understanding with Liberalism was possible in terms of human rights, but even with this strip of common ground as a mediating discourse, there remained substantial differences between Catholic teaching and Liberalism. Regarding democracy, the possibility existed for more substantial convergence between Catholic social thought and democratic polity. In his extensive and detailed essay, “Catholicism and Liberal Democracy,” Princeton University Professor Paul Sigmund identified Pacem in Terris as a unique text in paving the way for Vatican II’s endorsement of the right to religious freedom and, beyond this, to democracy. Sigmund points to the encyclical’s assertion that, “the dignity of the human person involved the right to take an active part in public affairs and to contribute one’s part to the other common good of the citizens.”11 Like other statements in Pacem in Terris, this support for democracy is expressed in general terms rather than a clear endorsement, but the encyclical’s princi-
ple became the foundation for the council’s endorsement of both the right to religious freedom and democratic polity.

Vatican II produced sixteen major documents, covering both the internal life of the Church and its relationships to other religious traditions and to the secular world. The two texts that are pertinent to this chapter are *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes*. They share some secular themes, but differ in style and character. *Dignitatis Humanae* has a single, important purpose and stands as a culminating moment in the long debate in Catholicism about the meaning of religious freedom. The precise objective of the declaration is stated in its second paragraph: “This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom . . . [and] that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself.” This simple, direct affirmation of a basic human right took centuries of argument to find its place in the social teaching of Catholicism. Some serious opposition to it was sustained throughout the first three years of Vatican II. To affirm this right, however, was to presume that it should be honored in any specific form of government or polity. So the question for this chapter remains: What is the relationship of the conciliar declaration to democratic polity?

In answer to this question, Fr. Murray, the principal drafter of the declaration, is uniquely helpful. In commentaries after the council, Murray argued that the affirmation of a right to religious freedom was in part the Church’s response to two broad themes of modern life: the human person’s rising sense of political consciousness, and the desire of citizens to live under a government limited by law and respect for human rights. While these characteristics of civil society (also noted in *Pacem in Terris*) are themes rather than specific arguments, Murray also pointed to the substantive fact that Pius XII and John XXIII had endorsed the concept of the “constitutional state,” in a more limited understanding of the power and rights of the state than had characterized Catholic teaching through the pontificate of Leo XIII.

There are different ways to define democracy, but an essential component is a legal system that defines the state’s powers and sets precise limits. Within this structure, human rights are central concepts: “The protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of man ranks among the essential duties of government; therefore, government is to assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all its citizens in an effective manner by just laws
and by other appropriate means.” In clarifying the Catholic Church’s position on democracy, the conciliar declaration relies in its argument for religious freedom on characteristics of government that are central aspects of democracy.

The companion text from Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, is a lengthy reflection on a broader question than religious freedom. It is the theme, as ancient as Augustine, of the relationship of the Church to the world. The “world” here can mean its political, intellectual, legal, scientific, or economic dimensions. *Gaudium et Spes* has a distinctive place in Catholic social thought: It builds on the tradition, but it is more explicitly theological; it also reframes questions (such as war and peace) in new ways. Sigmund rightly argues that in its treatment of democracy, it builds on *Pacem in Terris*, but is even more explicit in its endorsement of this polity. Again, Sigmund identifies a section of *Gaudium et Spes* that he calls a “formal commitment of Catholicism to democracy”:

> It is in full accord with human nature that judicial-political structures should, with even better success and without any discrimination, afford all the citizens the chance to participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders.

In interpreting these conciliar texts elsewhere, I have argued that it is not only the conceptual support for democracy and human rights that is the measure of Catholic commitment to both, but also the public engagement of the Church, from the papacy to the parish, national episcopal conferences, religious orders, and lay Catholics, within countries and in international forums, that illustrates the contrast between the nineteenth century and our own time. John Paul II’s ministry was a unique testimony to the bond linking the Church to democracy.

**John Paul II**

In his pontificate of twenty-seven years, John Paul II enhanced Catholic social teaching and the Church’s public role in a far-reaching fashion. His impact involved both words and deeds: What he did and what he refused to do, what he said and how he said it, made a great difference. In all of his social teaching, he was at pains to stress continuity with the words of
his predecessors. But John Paul II also moved Catholic social thought to new frontiers, by word and deed. The reasons for his impact were multi-dimensional: First, he was a professional philosopher who always extended his reflections to a philosophical-theological contribution; second, the fact that he was a citizen, a priest, and a bishop in a communist state, with a command economy and few political freedoms, gave his teaching a unique perspective and power; third, he played an acclaimed role in the collapse of communism; fourth, he never confined his social critique only to Europe, communism, and Western democracies; rather, he focused substantially also on the fate and future of the Global South. To illustrate his contribution to human rights and democracy, I will refer to three texts: his two addresses to the United Nation (of 1979 and 1995) and his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991).

Pope John Paul II was twice invited to address the General Assembly of the United Nations and did so with a profound sense that he was before what the Yale historian Paul Kennedy has called “The Parliament of Man.” His two addresses spanned the collapse of the Cold War. Neither address was specifically focused on democracy, but both were relevant to the theme. The 1979 address was dedicated to a reflection on the United Nations, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and the Holy See’s collaboration with the United Nations. The address served to set the direction of John Paul’s pontificate in making the defense of human rights a programmatic theme of his ministry. The pope did not directly address the topic of democracy. His comment on political systems was pitched at a higher level: “It is a question of the highest importance that in internal social life, as well as in international life, all human beings in every nation and country should be able to enjoy effectively these full rights under any political regime or system.” In this address, and in other forms of teaching, John Paul made his case that the right to religious freedom should have a unique significance and protection because it served as a foundation for other rights.

The relationship of democracy and human rights is a topic that extends beyond the bounds of religious discourse; human rights as moral claims, based on human dignity and having, therefore, universal validity, are a test for any political regime. There are certainly arguments made on a normative and empirical basis that democracy provides the most secure political context for the protection and promotion of human rights. John Paul did not make this case. In this early address to the question, he stressed the universality of human rights, argued that they needed a solid philosophical
foundation, and then provided an original exposition about how the “two kinds” of rights found in the UN Declaration and in its implementing covenants should be understood.

This latter question sounds very theoretical, but in fact was a dividing line at the United Nations throughout the Cold War. Some Western voices argued that only political-civil rights are truly rights, whereas socio-economic rights are human needs, but should not be given the status of rights. Voices from the Communist states, and also Western voices, argued for equality in the status of rights. John Paul entered this political thicket by redefining the rights debate by speaking of spiritual and material goods. He clearly held to the position that both claims to rights were valid, but he moved beyond that debate to argue that spiritual goods and the rights to them should be given priority. His argument was that spiritual goods are not limited and do not lead to conflict about how many people seek to possess them. Material goods by definition are limited in supply; they are surely necessary, but pursuit of them is more likely to lead to conflict in society. It is important to stress that the pope’s overarching argument is that both kinds of rights are necessary in every society. The 1979 address was highly regarded as a clarion call to protect human dignity and to commit the members of the United Nations to implementation of the Declaration of 1948.

When John Paul II returned to the UN General Assembly in 1995 for the observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Charter, he consciously developed his speech as a complement to the 1979 address. Then he spoke of the urgency to protect and promote the rights of the person in society. In 1995 he focused on the rights of nations, arguing that too little attention has been devoted to this theme. In a sense, the second address was a plea for a balanced view of nationalism. As a citizen of Poland, his voice carried special resonance in this argument. The pope was careful to acknowledge that nationalism has been an explosive idea in world politics, and he precisely noted that he was not arguing on a normative basis that every national claim necessarily deserved the status of sovereignty. Neither UN address took up the idea of democracy directly, but both dealt with issues that can be argued to be prior to democracy. As noted above, human rights provide the moral claims that can be used to give preference to democracy as a mode of governance. The rights of nations is a topic that cuts across the internal life of states and the relationship of states in the international order.
Pope John Paul II did address democracy directly in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991), a text that surveyed a century of papal social teaching in light of the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War. By 1991 John Paul II was a universally recognized leader of global significance. This recognition was uniquely tied to his acknowledged role (in tandem with others, to be sure) in bringing down the Communist order in Central and Eastern Europe. So there was widespread attention to the encyclical of 1991, expected not only to celebrate a century of social teaching, but also to offer reflections on the collapse of communism. Other theories were abroad in the world, tied principally to political, military, or economic factors. John Paul wove together distinct themes to account for the peaceful transition that ended the Cold War. He attributed the Communist failure, first, to its distorted view of the human person and the human rights violations that followed; second, to its inability to meet human economic needs; third, to the nonviolent opposition it faced from citizens; and fourth, to its atheistic orientation.23

The encyclical moved from a critique of communism to a narrative commentary about the Catholic vision of state, society, and culture. In this context, John Paul turned his attention to democracy. Strikingly, the title of the chapter was “State and Culture,” not State and Society, the more likely linkage used in a Western context. It quickly became evident, however, why the pope linked state and culture: It fit his pervasive interest in analyzing the role of state.

The encyclical began its consideration of the state with the strongest explicit endorsement of democracy yet recorded in official Catholic teaching:

> The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.24

From Pius XII’s acknowledgment that many believe democracy is a demand of nature, through *Pacem in Terris*’s thematic discussion of the elements of democracy, to the conciliar texts, there was a clear direction to Catholic teaching: coming to terms with a form of governance that Catholicism had approached skeptically in the past. But the explicit endorsement of democracy by a pope from the East was a new marker in the Church’s social tradition. Quickly after the statement just quoted, the encyclical began to
probe its meaning: “Authentic democracy,” it said, is based on the rule of law and a correct conception of human nature. Then the step to culture was taken. In other places, I have written that the pope’s belief in the political elements of democracy is clear cut and certain. But equally clear were his doubts about the cultural context often associated in the West with democracy. The critique was direct: “There is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life.”25 The Pope expresses his awareness that in Western societies, shaped by a secular conception of the state and pluralistic fabric of society, much public discussion and political commentary is premised on the idea of a “thin” theory of values a society should pursue. This idea may not be rooted in agnosticism or atheism, but in a belief that deeply rooted convictions about what constitutes “the good society” make consensus about law and policy very difficult. A “thin” theory of the good places much greater emphasis on tolerance, procedural rules, and individual freedom. An example, pertinent to this chapter, is debates about human rights. The debate goes back to the moment John Paul celebrated in his 1979 UN Address—the Declaration on Human Rights. Even in the human rights community of advocacy, debates about what counts as a right, the content of rights, and the relationship among rights, are relatively simpler than finding consensus on the foundation of rights, where they are rooted, and why. When *Centesimus Annus* speaks of “authentic democracy,” the foundation of it is an understanding of human rights grounded in the dignity of the person. While the UN Declaration does cite human dignity as the basis of rights, John Paul has a much “thicker” conception of this idea than prevails in human rights discourse today.

John Paul did not remain, however, at the purely philosophical level when addressing the theme of democracy. Credited in part with the collapse of communism in Poland, and then in other states of the Communist system, in *Centesimus Annus* he turned to a critique of established democracies in the West. With his idea of “authentic democracy” in the background, he warned advanced democracies that failure to attend to foundational issues ran a huge risk, for, “as history demonstrates, democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.”26 At a more operational level, he criticized democratic societies that failed to create an effective consensus to take needed critical decisions.
In retrospect, there is no question that John Paul II tightened the bond between Catholicism and democracy. At the same time, some of his basic concerns remain debated to some degree inside the Church and more so in the wider civil society and international society. Yet, through his teaching and his pastoral ministry in countries throughout the world, John Paul II did strengthen the ties between Catholicism and democracy. From Poland to the Philippines, and from South Korea to Central America, John Paul II entered complex and conflicted political settings as a voice for human rights and democracy. Human rights advocates in the religious and secular communities came to see John Paul as a unique voice. This did not always mean they found his theoretical and/or theological arguments convincing. Willing to support the right to religious freedom with him, they did not necessarily see it as the anchor for human rights. After the collapse of communism there was broader agreement to support the full spectrum of rights found in the UN Declaration and Covenants; this was not necessarily based on the pope’s 1979 Address about the unity and priority of rights. Finally, many remained unconvinced that a unified foundational view of rights could be achieved.

Benedict XVI

Benedict XVI strongly supported his predecessor’s position that both human rights and democratic polity require a firm grounding in values and principles of the moral order.27 In his 2008 Address to the United National General Assembly, Benedict noted positively that “human rights are increasingly being presented as the common language and the ethical substratum of international relations.”28 He then went on to stress in his own way the message of John Paul II about the necessary grounding of human rights:

They are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations. Removing human rights from this context would mean restricting their range and yielding to a relativistic conception, according to which the meaning and interpretation of rights could vary and their universality would be denied in the name of different cultural, political, social and religious outlooks.”29
Benedict brought to the papacy his own distinctive characteristics, in some ways complementary to the positions of John Paul II, and in other ways shaped and expressed differently. He was a theologian with a distinguished publication record reaching back before Vatican II. He had less experience and engagement in the public arena than his predecessor and seemed less suited to that dimension of the papal office. He was clearly more a teacher than a diplomat or a prophetic voice on public issues. Looking back after his historic resignation from the papal office, it is reasonable to assume that Catholics will read his theological writings long after his papacy has receded from public attention.

Pope Benedict XVI brought to the papal office two deeply held convictions, which remained prominent and persistent in his public role and related directly to his assessment of democracy. The first was a contemporary conception of the traditional Catholic conviction that the world of faith and the world of reason are complementary understandings of truth. They are not adversarial or inimical positions. The second conviction may have been Benedict’s primary pastoral objective: to address the secularization of public life and public policy that he saw in the postindustrial democracies of the West. Neither of these positions was missing in the pontificate of John Paul II, but Benedict made them singularly important. Key texts surveyed below highlight these themes.

Reason and faith were at the heart of one of Benedict’s most publicized addresses, his 2006 lecture at Regensburg University. Benedict had taught in the theology faculty and his address was a homecoming in multiple ways. It must be stated clearly that the pope’s intention in giving the address and its consequences were very different. The subject of the address, faith and reason, initially became lost in a major controversy sparked by a quote used by Benedict from a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor that disparaged Islam. The quote actually was not essential to the pope’s intent or primary audience. He addressed the gathering at Regensburg as representatives of the Western university world, and his message was a critique of a narrow positivistic conception of reason, rooted in the physical sciences, which excluded the classical conceptions of philosophy and theology. The outcome of this postenlightenment definition of reason reduced the role of religion and ethics to private status. Theology and ethics in this conception were marginal disciplines in the university world and excluded from influence in the world of public policy. His defense of a public role for religion, for a fruitful collaboration of reason and faith, was stated
precisely: “We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons.”

The missed opportunity of this address was that it not only pointed to instances in secular Western democracies where religion can be marginalized. Beyond the pope’s message, that secularity without religion can distort what he called “the genuine dialogue of culture and religions so urgently needed today,” lay the other issue that religion without the disciplining role of reason can easily become dangerous. A mischosen quote sacrificed an opportunity to address the role of religion in Western democracies and the role of religion in world politics.

Benedict XVI returned often and more effectively to questions of reason and faith, and did so in part because of his second major concern, the secularization of society in the postindustrial democracies. The topic had both pastoral and public dimensions to it. It also arose from the division of faith and reason, particularly in Western Europe. Pastorally, Benedict and many others believed the secularization of society led to the post–World War II decline of participation in countries with historically strong Catholic cultures and populations. The consequences of the secularization of the public arena marginalized the voice of religion, as just noted above. Pope Benedict chose another German setting in 2011—that of the German parliament—to address the consequences of secularization in the public arena. In a tightly designed academic lecture, he traced the relationship of biblical, philosophical, and legal sources as foundations of what he described as “a free state of law.” To some degree, the address was about differences between a Natural Law conception of law and a legal positivistic view represented (he noted) by Hans Kelsen. Beyond this theoretical debate, he argued that the complexity of public issues in Western democracies today is magnified by the power residing in human hands. “Man can destroy the world. He can manipulate himself. He can, so to speak, make human beings and he can deny them their humanity.” In the face of these human stakes, “the decisions of a democratic politician, the question of what now correspond to the law of truth, what is actually right and may be enacted as law, is less obvious.”

Benedict’s response was twofold. First, a call to recognize the secular value of a Natural Law ethic for public policy, a language and criteria that can be used across lines of cultures, different religions, and even between the world’s belief and unbelief. Second, while recognizing the essential
value of a public ethic rooted in “nature and reason as the true sources of law,” Benedict also made a further point. In a culture that marginalizes religion from its public discourse, there is a loss of both historical memory of religious insight and a voice that can complement nature and reason.

At this point Europe’s cultural heritage ought to come to our assistance. The conviction that there is a Creator God is what gave rise to the idea of human rights, the idea of the equality of all people before the law, the recognition of the inviolability of human dignity in every single person and the awareness of people’s responsibility for their actions. Our cultural memory is shaped by these rational insights.

Benedict’s deep convictions, about faith and reason and about the danger of secularization for society, share two characteristics: They are faithful to a long Catholic tradition, and they are difficult to share with democratic societies on both sides of the Atlantic, and beyond, today. As noted, both convictions bear directly on one’s conception of democracy. Benedict XVI offered his specific views of this theme in a historic setting: Westminster Hall in the United Kingdom. The background and the topic for the lecture were both significant. Benedict began by paying tribute to the role of the British Parliament and to the “common law tradition” which has influenced legal systems for centuries and throughout the world. His subject was “the proper place of religious belief within the political process.” The address resonated with the two themes just discussed in this essay. In response to his own question of where can one find the ethical foundation for political choice, Benedict invoked the Catholic tradition, which “maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation.”

He asked and answered his own question in a tone respectful of the gap that likely separated most of his audience from “the Catholic tradition.” But then he moved beyond his initial answers, seeking to find common ground on the question of the proper place of religion in politics. Returning to the theme of reason and faith, he argued for a dialectical relationship of “purifying” discourse, with religion playing a purifying role in reason’s development of moral norms, and then reason playing a purifying role within religious traditions. In Benedict’s perspective, the world of religious belief and secular rationality need each other. There is a religious
potential for “corrective” action in the political arena, and a need for rational “corrective” critique within the religious traditions.

From *Pacem in Terris* (1963) through the retirement of Benedict XVI (2013), there has been a double dynamic at work around the theme of Roman Catholicism and democracy. The dominant note has been an increasing acceptance by the Church of the human rights and democratic traditions—indeed, beyond acceptance, a move toward identifying why the Catholic social tradition should find in these secular traditions reasons for support and complementarity. This dynamic has been the subject of this essay. But the narrative should not close without noting a counterpoint, voiced by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, which is that the way in which specific topics in modern democracies are interpreted, decided in courts, and expressed in legislation in the twenty-first century (particularly a range of issues in bioethics, the understanding of marriage and family, and sexuality itself), has created quite specific conflicts for Catholicism, in spite of the more long-term reconciliation that has occurred between the Church and democratic regimes.

**Notes**


4. John Courtney Murray SJ wrote six major articles before Vatican II that were close textual readings of Leo XIII’s corpus on Church-State, religious
freedom, and democracy. A synthetic statement of this work was published during Vatican II (as a briefing paper for the American Bishops) under the title, “The Problem of Religious Freedom,” *Theological Studies* 25 (1964): 503–75. In addition, he authored a series of scholarly commentaries on *Dignitatis Humanae* after the Council, and a number of these were edited by Leon J. Hooper SJ as *Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggles with Pluralism* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

5. Murray saw Leo XIII as a transitional figure in Catholicism coming to grips with democracy. Leo XIII moved beyond his predecessors, but, Murray argued, was limited by the historical context (inside and outside the Church) in which he functioned; see “Leo XIII on Church and State: The General Structure of the Controversy,” *Theological Studies* 14 (1953): 1–30.


